DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 126 370 CG 010 571

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TITLE Dynamic Aspects of Ritual: A Resource in Decline?
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. on Aging (DHEW/PHS), Bethesda, Md.
PUB DATE Oct 75
GRANT AG-00484
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Gerontological Society, (28th, Louisville, Kentucky, October 26-30, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Anthropology; *Community Services; *Cross Cultural Studies; Gerontology; *Human Resources; *Older Adults; *Participation; Performance Factors; Retirement; Senior Citizens; Social Change; Sociology; Surveys; Theories

ABSTRACT

It has sometimes been proposed that, as the physical prowess of aging people wanes, the nature of their public service may change: if they are no longer able to provide the community with mechanical energy, they nevertheless perform important functions in public situations, their contribution shifting in a sense from power to modeled guidance. In a systematic sample of 45 societies, we examine the participation of old men and women in ritual performances, as well as the reverberations of these performances. Aging members of these societies seem to provide other members of these communities with traditional models for living and working, expressed cyclically at celebrated stages of the life cycle and the work cycle to which all community members adhere. We briefly describe broad discernible trends, especially as they relate to the current fortunes of the aged. The results of the survey suggest that if a decline in ritual participation among old people exists, it may not be a permanent one, but may be linked to the condition of rapid social change, a characteristic of the secular quality of Western society. (Author)

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ED126370

DYNAMIC ASPECTS OF RITUAL: A RESOURCE IN DECLINE?

by

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Paper presented at the 28th Annual Meeting of the Gerontological Society, Louisville, Kentucky, October 26-30, 1975.

*Robert J. Maxwell and Philip Silverman have made useful comments and criticisms in earlier drafts of this paper. Tony Fels and Pierre Machiels also assisted in the preparation of the research data.

The project is supported by National Institute on Aging Grant #AG-00484 which is administered through the California State College Bakersfield Foundation.

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DYNAMIC ASPECTS OF RITUAL: A RESOURCE IN DECLINE?

Eleanor Krassen Maxwell

This paper represents a preliminary attempt to analyze the qualitative data from forty-five pre-industrial societies concerning the activities of the aged. Pre-industrial societies were chosen in order to establish an evolutionary and processional framework. The data consists of statements about aging written by anthropologists, sociologists, and missionaries, and others who have written eye-witness accounts of these societies. Several ethnographic works were read for each society and statements concerned with the activities of the aged or the treatment of the aged by other members of societies were abstracted so that we could compare them with similar activities in other societies. We hoped that when all the activities of the aged from the various societies were compared, some general pattern in their activities would emerge. The goal was the discovery of just what things old people do in pre-industrial societies. Under what conditions do they do them? And what are the consequences of their activities?

This paper deals specifically with the ritual activities of the aged, because after examining the data from the various societies it became clear that this was one social realm in which older persons over and over again appeared. Ritual for the purpose of this paper will be defined according to the actual activities described in the ethnographies. We did not read certain works looking to see if old people performed specific ceremonies.

We instead examined all the activities of the aged, and from these were able to determine that their expressive activities could be described according to certain patterns which emerged.

What kinds of ritual are old people involved in? Older persons seem to be involved in three basic types of ritual activities: life cycle ceremonies, work cycle rituals, and power displays.

The first type which shows up quite frequently are ritual activities which take place at various stages of the life cycle. There is usually some type of ceremony associated with them which has a definite format, thus demonstrating to the rest of the community that the subjects of the celebration have symbolically completed the life cycle status passage. Periods most often celebrated are birth, initiation into adulthood or the time one comes of age, marriage, elderhood, death, and ancestorhood. More consistently than any other group, old men and women are singled out for some type of recognition in these ceremonies. Old Apaches bless babies so they too will live a long life while they recite the prescriptions for successful survival. Elders like the Bakongo old men of Africa, are either in charge of training initiates, or else as among the Teda Nomads of the Sahara Desert, they are given the honor of performing the actual initiation ceremony. Often these ceremonies are used as an excuse to recite tribal lore, myths, and history. Old women are often the intermediaries in marriage plans and both sexes of elders are actively involved in telling the bride and groom how to make their marriage work. In more than half the societies that we have studied, older people are influential in planning and performing the activities connected with the final stage of life, preparing a person for another world, his death

and his funeral. One Mapuche ethnographer (the Mapuche are in Chile) reported that the funeral rites in that society might as well have been classrooms, "where male elders impart detailed comments on male values." Many times when there is an ancestor cult in a society, you find that the aging members of the society are directing prayers, sacrifices, and even seance type activities in order to call on the former members of their group for advice.

The entire community is often involved in these life cycle ceremonies, but the older people usually serve as sponsors for some member of their family. Most older persons are involved in at least one of these ceremonies in all pre-industrial societies.

If we look at work cycle activities, old people play a leading role although in this type of ritual they are usually there as leaders of various professions or other sub-groups in the society. The activities involved are connected with some activity in the work cycle and the ritual itself might be a formal ceremony or a simple prayer. Sometimes even the presence of an older person insures a successful hunt or harvest. Who conducts these rituals and who attends them seems to be related to the relatively rudimentary division of labor in the society. Seniority seems to be important, but only within the limits of the group which is involved in the ceremony. Some of the ceremonies are again examples of initiation rites, but instead of being admitted into a new age grade, the elders initiate the youth into the work force. Old Balinese priests train new ones, chiefs of some societies train new chiefs and conduct the ceremonies in which their chieftainship is announced. Shamans also initiate their own and so do craft specialists and medical practitioners.

Some of the work cycle rituals are similar to the third type of ritual in which old people are involved, namely the power displays. Sometimes it is believed that some older people in a society will have the power to affect the weather. They will make it rain so the crops will grow, or they will make the sun shine so the entire community will be able to hunt. In other power displays the aged will demonstrate that they have either the supernaturally endowed ability or the technologically derived power to cure the sick, cause misfortune, communicate with ancestors or animal guardians or perform certain feats of divination, from which they are later able to protect themselves or other members of the community. Women and men perform these rites for various family members; only a few actually have these power skills, but again, the aged, more than any other status group are believed to possess them.

Let us consider the consequences of elderly participation in these rituals. How are other persons' lives affected by following the ritual patterns of the aged? Examining the jobs that the old people actually do in these ceremonies, certain patterns begin to emerge. First of all, most of the rituals are concerned with the life cycle. What do they do there? They seem to be modeling the future behavior of others and teaching and preparing others for their future social roles. They are the ones who are instructing others in these status passages. They sometimes go off alone with the initiates and teach them what they have to know in their new status. They are thus the modeling agents for these young people. Because it is the oldest members of society who teach the youngsters, the initiates are provided with lifetime models. They can look at their aged mentor and know that this

is one part of himself, in a role or pattern of behavior and associations that he can follow for the rest of his life. He represents what they will become.

In a cross-cultural study of initiation ceremonies, Frank Young concluded that initiation ceremonies were directly related to the amount of solidarity expressed by members of the community. Keeping solidarity in mind, consider the consequences of the fact that it is usually the oldest members of the society who are initiating the youngest. It becomes clear that an initiator who is still obviously a member of a group after an entire lifetime will be able to impress more dramatically upon the initiate the fact that he will be a member of a solidarity group for a long time to come. By having the aged members of society perform the ceremonies a lasting continuity is implied. A cycle is implied. A lifetime model is expressed.

In describing the Kwoma life cycle rituals, Whiting tells us that there is a basic life process going on in that community. For any individual the process is completed when he has gone through the age-grade ceremony first as an initiate and then as an initiator. From our data it becomes clear that the Kwoma experience is not unique. In many societies, youth are socialized and modeled by their elders, later in life becoming the modeling agents for the next generation.

Durkheim induced from a study of Aranda ethnography that ritual in primitive societies characterized by a collective conscience was used as a means of expressing and dramatizing shared values, thus insuring the continuance of a fairly stable social order. From our own ethnographic survey we have seen a wider range of societies than Durkheim examined. We have seen cases where models seemed static and options were few as well as those where

younger members of the society were being exposed to other ways of doing things from that of their ancestors and were facing options which forced them to reject the ways of the past.

It seems to me that it is impossible to discuss models and modeling without recognizing that models do not remain unchanged and the modeling process is by necessity constantly evolving. In any society at any given time, rules for what we do are created in interaction, and the models that we set up for these rules cannot keep up with the fast changes that occur in them as interaction takes place. Social scientists who have studied rules, norms, and models have recognized for some time that there is a fundamental distinction between what people <u>say</u> they do (herein called "tradition"), and what they actually do (herein called "doing"). Expressed "traditional" models always appear to be static. To state a rule gives it an unnatural and false sense of closure.

As changes begin to emerge the traditional or spoken way of doing things will appear to be characterized by slow change, social inertia, limited options, and trusted techniques. The "doing" way will appear to be linked with pragmatism -- the easy way of doing things, multiple options and progress.

From my time perspective, my present, the tradition of pre-industrial societies seems to be a range of limited options, small-scale agriculture, little contact with diverse cultures, and few sub-communities or different social worlds within any society. That doesn't mean that these options don't exist in the absolute. It only means that when they are compared to the multiplicity of modern times, they seem to have been less significant.

In pre-industrial societies the elders have been the upholders of tradition. The continuity of the traditional system is reinforced by the

fact that the aging members of society are modeling the actions of the youth. Where at an earlier stage of their lives they were actively doing the work, in old age they demonstrate that they still accept traditional ways of doing things, by actively expressing the established rules for them.

Ritual is not the only context in which such modeling takes place. There is also reinforcement of traditional rules through both solicited and unsolicited advice. There is formal teaching in classrooms. There is entertainment and game playing in which traditional ways of doing things are described. But ritual emerges in our data as the last functional context in pre-industrial societies, for modelers of traditional values, as new traditions take over, perhaps because it has so often gained supernatural sanction. However, as the old tradition starts to break down, even supernaturally sanctioned rituals become ineffective in attempts to insure the continuance of the old-fashioned social order. The previously accepted modeler of traditional values now becomes the unaccepted negative model for the way things should not be done. In other words, he becomes the "bad example."

In an industrial society like our own, we have moved very far from the Durkheimian ideal of a total society with a shared collective conscience. In societies like the one Durkheim studied, youth have few options and changes don't take place so noticeably in any individual's lifetime. Rules were relatively simple and the oldest members of a community were those most imbued with the tradition and those who were probably most capable of transmitting traditional values.

Our data seem to suggest that if there were a solidary group in modern society which also showed evidence of continuity, one in which new things

weren't happening every day, the members of that group with the most seniority would serve as the modeling agents for the new members. There might also be some sort of initiation connected with the group in which members with the most seniority would teach the newcomers about the group's past activities and rules of conduct to which all group members adhered. If there were such a solidary group, the oldest members would be singled out in some way during the initiation procedure in order to demonstrate the continuity of the model in the solidary group.

But in our society, for the most part, each individual belongs to several social worlds, perhaps to several "mini systems." To each one of them he brings different parts of himself, different faces suited to different situations. Each social group has a membership which creates its own rules. The groups are not static; memberships change and so do the rules. Because there are several such dynamic worlds, our "total society" if it exists at all, appears to change at a pace far greater than its simpler counterpart. Instead of total solidarity, we seem to have diverse loyalties. We have so many reference groups that even in our various social worlds we don't have mini-solidary groups. We have to know not just the rules of the groups we feel loyal towards. We have to know something about other groups also so we can have some minimal amount of interaction with them as well. The consequences of multiple loyalties and diverse commitments are great, but only a few can be considered here. We are no longer involved in a small isolated social group to which we difer and look to for information on all aspects of our lives. There is no single group of face-to-face peers (at least I hope not)

which watches us every day to monitor our deeds. And because the norms are constantly changing and are diverse for each of our many associations, our formal models become different as well. Ritual is no longer an effective context of mandated social control. In our "total society" there is no single shared system of belief that can be expressed in so abstract a manner. Instead we have formal codified laws, that are enforced by courts of law and appointed officials who often fail at their task because there isn't agreement among their constituents.

The most important thing that happens as a result of the change to multiplicity is that changes appear to happen far more rapidly today than they did earlier. These changes have created new options for all, although the aged can't always count on being the modelers of tradition any more. They do have options too however. Many of them unfortunately do not know this because many of our current models tell them and us as well that options are only for the youth and that the old should just prepare to die.

But this is not the case. Models and modelers can be changed. Most people admit now that the process of socialization continues throughout the life cycle. Elders then can avail themselves of options and participate in as many social worlds as they choose. Impressions from having interviewed and worked with senior citizens during the past six years indicate to me that those who seem to be experiencing "dignified aging" have one thing in common, an absolute determination to continue leading useful and productive lives. Our data indicate that we must continue to modify our models, until everyone is guaranteed this option.

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